‘useful idiot’: meaning and origin

word histories

“ad fontes!”

‘useful idiot’: meaning and origin

Pascal Trégueretymology, public affairs, United Kingdom & Ireland, USA & CanadaItaly, newspapers & magazines, phrases, politics, Serbo-Croat, United Kingdom, USA, Yugoslavia

The phrase ***useful idiot*** designates a naive or credulous person who can be manipulated or exploited to advance a cause or political agenda.

I have found an isolated early occurrence of this phrase in *Party Spirit in France*, published in *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science, and Art* (London, England) of Saturday 11th June 1864:

> The French Government lately brought in a Bill on the Coalition of Workmen, and as it seemed an improvement on the law then existing, and as liberal a measure as could be carried and as France was likely to welcome, M. Emile Ollivier, among other persons, voted for it. Immediately there was a great outcry that he was a turncoat, a traitor, a

> secret Imperialist. It was in vain that he urged in his justification that he was but voting as he thought, and that, if he disagreed from his friends, the disagreement was a perfectly honest one. M. Jules Favre and M. Jules Simon spoke vehemently against him, and all the purists of the Opposition called out that they were smitten by the man of their trust. M. Ollivier took no public notice, and it was difficult for him to take any. If his friends could not understand the meaning of an honest difference of opinion, how was he to enlighten them? But at last a supremely foolish elector, one of those useful idiots who are furnished in the nick of time by every constituency in every country, wrote to say that he could not possibly vote for a representative who had gone so far wrong as to vote with the Government on any conceivable occasion. This was exactly what M. Ollivier wanted. Under the pretext of correcting the views of this poor anonymous creature, M. Ollivier wrote a letter explaining to France what he conceived to be his position.

However, it was in the late 1940s that ***useful idiot***—as well as ***useful innocent***—gained currency, in the following acceptations:
– a supporter of democracy who, in a specific country, agreed to form a coalition government with communists;
– a citizen of a non-communist country sympathetic to communism, who was regarded by communists as naive and susceptible to manipulation for propaganda or other purposes.

USEFUL INNOCENT

The phrase ***useful innocent*** is a translation from Serbo-Croat. These are the earliest occurrences that I have found, in chronological order:

1-: From *Washington Correspondence*, by Theodore C. Alford, published in *The Kansas City Times* (Kansas City, Missouri) of Monday 23rd September 1946:

> In a speech last February in Cleveland, Wallace [1] denied he was a Communist, but admitted “the greatest and most friendly feeling” for Russia. It is doubtful whether he could be called correctly a fellow traveler. Were he living in Tito’s [2] country he probably would be classed as one of the Koristal [sic] Budale, or “useful innocents”. He certainly proved himself exceedingly useful to Comrade Molotov [3] at the Paris conference.

[1] Henry Agard Wallace (1888-1965) served as Secretary of Commerce until 20th September 1946, when Harry S. Truman (1884-1972), 33rd President of the USA (1945-53), fired him for delivering a speech urging conciliatory policies towards the Soviet Union.
[2] Josip Broz (1892-1980), commonly known as Tito, was a Yugoslav communist revolutionary and statesman, who served as Prime Minister (1945-53) and President (1953-80) of Yugoslavia.
[3] The Soviet stateman Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov (born Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Skryabin – 1890-1986) was Commissar, later Minister, for Foreign Affairs from 1939 to 1949.

2-: From the following article, published in *The Reader's Digest* (Pleasantville, New York: The Reader's Digest Association, Inc.) of October 1946 (as reprinted **here**):

> From behind the scenes in the Balkans: A grim story for the western world to ponder
> Yugoslavia's Tragic Lesson to the World
> Condensed from a forthcoming book by Bogdan Raditsa [4]
>
> […]
> The present Yugoslav Government of Marshal Tito […] calls itself a People's Front. It came into existence as a proposed cooperative union of all political parties that were seeking a more democratic way of life for all Yugoslav peoples: Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Bosnians, Herzegovinians, Montenegrians, Macedonians. Included in this union was the Communist Party.
> From the beginning the Communist party aimed not at cooperation but at control. Little by little it absorbed all posts of power, open or hidden. The outcome was the very opposite from democracy. It was the extinction of the freedom of speech, press and thought. It was the supervision of the lives of all citizens by a new secret political police. It was arbitrary arrests, imprisonments, executions, massacres. It was a dictatorship of terror and death by a tiny clique.
> In the Serbo-Croat language the communists have a phrase for true democrats who consent to collaborate with them for "democracy". It is Koristne Budale, or Useful Innocents.
> I was one of those Innocents. The story of my gradual awakening may serve as a warning to Innocents in other countries.

[…]
Since the “liberation”, the communists themselves admit that—by detention, disappearance or death—they have got rid of 500,000 Yugoslavs. I think it clear that their purpose is to “liquidate” the entire agricultural, commercial and industrial Yugoslav non-communist middle class. “The new men will take their place quickly enough.”
In the midst of this terror the elections of last November were held. There was only one slate of candidates, all of them of the People’s Front—all picked or approved by the Communist Party. To vote against any candidate it was necessary to cast a “no” ballots [sic] against the whole ticket. The “yes” ballots, after months of purging and intimidations, were victorious—overwhelmingly.
Some “Useful Innocents” in the onlooking democratic world were impressed by those elections. They can learn their true nature from General Rankovich of OZNA. Addressing the elected national Assembly of Yugoslavia on March 24 of this year, he said:
“Those who oppose the policy of the present regime cannot possibly put themselves into power through free elections. They cannot participate in the government. And they cannot even exist as a tolerated opposition.”
[…]
I have dear friends in America. They see hope of the world in the development and perfecting of democracy in America. They are indeed right. But I should like to say to them:
Be careful with whom you share that great task. Be on guard against people who wrench words from their moorings and send them against their meanings. Be careful about people whose vocabulary is yours but whose record wherever they hold power is your destruction. Do not be Koristne Budale. Do not be “Useful Innocents”.

[4] Bogdan Raditsa (1904-1993) was a Croatian historian, journalist, diplomat, author and translator. He wrote *Yugoslavia’s Tragic Lesson to the World* in New York City, after his escape from Yugoslavia.

3-: From *Don’t Be a ‘Useful Innocent’!*, about a Vermont columnist named Theodore L. Salisbury, published in the *Burlington Daily News* (Burlington, Vermont) of Tuesday 1st October 1946:

Last week “Ted” came out in his column advocating “equal pay for equal

> work" anywhere in the country. […]
> […]
> The Communists in Yugoslavia call good-hearted, sincere advocates of democracy "Useful Innocents." While they let these people talk of democracy, and while they pretend to have free elections and industrial democracy, the Commies run Yugoslavia with an iron hand—behind the "popular" Front provided by the "Useful Innocents."
> […]
> […] "Ted" Salisbury, along with every other true democrat, should beware that he does not become a "Useful Innocent" who helps the Communist cause.

The Austrian economist Ludwig Von Mises (1881-1973) used the phrase ***useful innocent*** in *Socialism and Communism*, published in *Planned Chaos* (Irvington-on-Hudson, New York: Foundation for Economic Education, 1947):

> Marx and the Marxians erred lamentably when they assumed that the masses long for a revolutionary overthrow of the "bourgeois" order of society. The militant communists are to be found only in the ranks of those who make a living from their communism or expect that a revolution would further their personal ambitions. The subversive activities of these professional plotters are dangerous precisely on account of the naivety of those who are merely flirting with the revolutionary idea. Those confused and misguided sympathizers who call themselves "liberals" and whom the communists call "useful innocents," the fellow-travellers and even the majority of the officially registered party members, would be terribly frightened if they were to discover one day that their chiefs mean business when preaching sedition.

USEFUL IDIOT

Apparently, in the acceptations that it took in the late 1940s, ***useful idiot*** originated as a translation from an Italian expression (itself probably a translation from Serbo-Croat). These are the earliest occurrences that I have found, in chronological order:

1-: From the *San Francisco Examiner* (San Francisco, California) of Tuesday 6th April 1948:

Italy Threatens To Call Off Vote

Milan, April 5.—(INS)—Italian Interior Minister Mario Scelba [5] announced tonight that the Italian elections will be called off "if individual liberty is endangered." Scelba said he favored reorganization of the Italian police to enable policemen to guarantee freedom of the ballot.
He called Socialist Leader Pietro Nenni [6], who is co-operating with the Communists, the "No. 1 useful idiot assisting Communist aspirations to control Italy."

[5] Mario Scelba (1901-1991) was an Italian Christian-Democratic politician.
[6] Pietro Nenni (1891-1980) was an Italian socialist politician.

2-: From *Communist Shift Is Seen in Europe*, by Arnaldo Cortesi, published in *The New York Times* (New York City, New York) of Monday 21st June 1948:

The Communists are about to abandon their policy of Popular Fronts, which in Italy and some other countries saw them enter into close alliances with left-wing Socialists and other extreme parties.
This supposition is supported by recent article in the official organ of the Communist Information Bureau [Cominform] in Belgrade condemning Communist participation in Popular Fronts.
[..]
L'Umanita, right-wing Socialist newspaper, emphasized that if the Communists were abandoning Popular Fronts this would have far-reaching effects on the congress of Italian left-wing Socialists in Genoa next week.
L'Umanita said the Communists would give the "useful idiots" of the left-wing Socialist party the choice of merging with the Communist party or getting out. It declared this would mark the end of the pro-Communist policy followed by the left-wing Socialist leader, Pietro Nenni.

3-: From the *Journal-Every Evening* (Wilmington, Delaware) of Wednesday 23rd June 1948:

The 'Useful Idiots'

A new twist to the Communist line in Europe seems to be foreshadowed by a recent editorial in the official Cominform publication in Belgrade condemning Communist participation in Popular Fronts. For Popular Fronts have been a favorite and often successful strategy of the Communist conspiracy.

In Czechoslovakia, for instance, the Communists had less than one-third of the popular vote at the last free elections, not enough to enable them to rule the country alone. They ruled by persuading enough Socialists and others to form a Popular Front government with them. Then, less than four months ago, they staged a coup to throw their allies overboard and make sure that the people would never have a chance to vote the Communists out of office.

This device worked well for them in Czechoslovakia. But it failed in Italy, where they were first thrown out of the cabinet before they could seize power, then soundly defeated in the April elections. It has also failed in France. So the Kremlin and the Cominform apparently feel that rougher methods will be needed from now on. Thus their democratic allies, who believe in the ballot box, will be of no further use to them.

Such fellow-traveling allies are called “useful idiots” by an Italian publication. Like the Wallace followers in the United States, they have ignored the record of the last 12 years. Wherever the Communists have had the power, from Madrid in the Spanish civil war to Czechoslovakia today, they have persecuted or killed the useful idiots who refused to accept absolute dictation. But there are fewer useful idiots in Europe than there were. That is why the Communists have so far failed in Italy and France. And that is why they are now considering a change of strategy.

Related

‘idiot fringe’: meanings and origin

USA, 1927: a minority group regarded as eccentric, extremist or fanatical, or simply stupid—but originally, UK, 1873: a woman or girl’s hairstyle in which the front is cut straight and square across the forehead

31st Aug 2023

In "etymology"

Post navigation

%d

Original Link: https://wordhistories.net/2021/03/26/useful-idiot/